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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [PINS](#) [MR](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH GOVERNMENT TAKING A HARD LINE ON COUP
LEADERS IN MAURITANIA

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew R. Young. Reasons 1.4b,d

1. (C) SUMMARY: Romain Serman, Counselor on Africa at the French Presidency, on September 19 provided a frank assessment of the situation in Mauritania in the aftermath of the August 6 coup to Ambassador Mark Boulware, stating that the French are prepared for a "divorce" with Mauritania if President Abdallahi is not reinstated. President Sarkozy delivered the short and direct instructions to Serman to "get the (coup leaders) out," including former chief of staff of the Mauritanian army, General Aziz. Although Serman stated that the French were at a "low point" assessing the impact of their efforts in restoring democratic governance in Mauritania, he also expressed confidence in ultimately achieving the right outcome, quoting General Charles de Gaulle, who said, "we may lose the battle, but we will win the war." He seemed confident that continued French pressure, coupled with a withdrawal of French and European funding, would undercut Aziz's efforts, leave the Mauritians disenchanted with Aziz, and ultimately result in a return to democratic governance. Ambassador Boulware approved this message. END SUMMARY.

The Presidency on Mauritania

2. (C) U.S. Ambassador to Mauritania Mark Boulware met with Africa Counselor Romain Serman at the French Presidency on September 19. Serman began by noting that he traveled to Qatar on September 16 with Deputy Diplomatic Advisor Bruno Joubert to coordinate pressure on the coup leaders. Coup leader General Ghazwani had traveled there on September 17. Referring to additional steps to pressure the coup leaders, Serman expressed confidence the French could secure additional support at the UN. (NOTE: In a separate September 19 conversation, MFA DAS-equivalent Christine Fages also pointed to a UNSCR as a recourse; however, she noted the "Russia problem" that the community would face in the council given "other issues," presumably meaning the Russia-Georgia crisis. END NOTE.)

3. (C) Serman was frustrated that coup leader General Aziz was not "budging" from giving up power but stated that the French are considering imposing visa bans or travel restrictions on Mauritians involved in the coup, including Aziz's brother-in-law, to increase the pressure on the coup leaders. Serman echoed Fages' point that the Spanish are the "problem" on this issue, as Mauritians can bypass French restrictions by going to the Spanish -- who have not yet implemented the biometric passport -- and get a visa from them; given Schengen law, the visa then allows them full mobility into the rest of Europe. Serman outlined two possible outcomes; either the French "lose" or the coup leaders "crack" under continued international political pressure.

4. (C) Serman also outlined a series of meetings over the next month pertaining to the Mauritanian issue that could have a negative impact on efforts to pressure the coup leaders. The European Commission Fishing Agreement with

Mauritania -- in which Spanish interests are the strongest -- will be considered in breach by October if a payment of 86 million euros is not made to Mauritania. While it is possible this could result in European fishing rights being sold to others, Sermain believes the Europeans will follow through with this first payment. Other international opportunities to address the Mauritanian issue include a Fisheries meeting (Conseil de Peche) at the end of September, a European Commission meeting, and the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC).

15. (C) Sermain suggested two possible solutions to deal with the coup. He termed a "consensus option" would unite the opposition, Aziz, and important military and civilian officials around a reinstated President Abdallahi. A second option would involve the creation of a security council headed by the president of the Senate (but not the current Senate leader). The French have used "brutal" language to try to get General Ghazwani "to crack", but have yet to be successful in these efforts that stress continued pressure for appropriate action in keeping with President Sarkozy 's new Africa policy. Sermain stressed that France will maintain pressure on the coup leaders by blocking French (\$150 million NFI) and EU aid (\$600 million NFI) to Mauritania and would recall French attaches posted in Nouakchott. Sermain emphasized that General Aziz would have trouble building schools and roads without French and international aid. As a result of these actions, the remaining French presence in Mauritania will be focused on the fight against al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). On counterterrorism, Sermain said Franco-Mauritanian cooperation would continue, albeit at a discrete level. "We will fly our planes overhead a couple of times and will share intelligence," but that will be the

extent of French support and efforts to counter AQIM.

16. (C) Sermain noted other regional players including President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal and Algerian President Bouteflika have consulted the French on this issue. Sermain suggested the Mauritanian coup leaders are using money from Saudi Arabia to fund their efforts. (Note: In a separate meeting MFA Christine Fages said the coup leaders have used \$50 million from Saudi Arabia earmarked for the fight against terrorism to pay their deputies.) Commenting on the domestic situation, Ambassador Boulware observed one positive element is the fact that for the first time we are seeing resistance to a coup in Mauritania.

The French MFA on Mauritania

17. (C) On September 19, MFA DAS-equivalent Christine Fages delivered a similar message on Mauritania, although the MFA position was notably "softer" than the Presidency response to Sarkozy,s mandate "get them out of there." Fages questioned the feasibility of starting talks with coup leaders involving Abdallahi while the president is still under house arrest, commenting that there would first have to be a way to get Abdallahi to solicit international presence. According to Fages, opposition leader Ould Daddah believes Aziz wants to stay in power but could consider this current situation his "last chance."

18. (C) Fages echoed the French Presidency position on continued involvement in fighting AQIM while commenting she doubted the Mauritanian army could fight AQIM on its own, as they "ran away" during a recent AQIM attack that resulted in the disappearance of 12 Mauritanian soldiers whom the French judge were taken prisoner by AQIM.

19. (C) Offering a biographic comment on General Aziz, Fages and her deputy, Laurent Bigot, viewed the General as the lynchpin for all counterterrorism action. Ambassador Boulware agreed that Aziz is a "micromanager" and gives the final go-ahead, but observed he is not the one who plans everything. According to Bigot, young Mauritanian military officers do not like Aziz, but the army is unstable, does not have resources, and probably will fragment into two camps,

divided along those who support the coup d'etat and those who do not.

¶10. (C) Fages also stated that the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) which planned to meet on the margins of the PSC would not include Mauritania, something Fages commented the Arabs would not like. Regarding the Union for the Mediterranean (UPM), the situation in Mauritania posed a problem for the French; Fages stated the French do not know whom to invite and whom to exclude, and there are constant UPM meetings. Fages did not seem to think we could count on support from Arab countries or from China. China is waiting to see what is going to happen, and probably is waiting to acquire access to fishing zones, according to Fages. China does not want a second Sudan, but is less interested in Mauritania than in Sudan.

¶11. (C) On tactics, Fages outlined two French efforts. Within the EU, Fages stated there is the possibility of invoking Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement of 2000 to freeze certain funds in a very specific manner that would increase pressure on the coup leaders. The French are also asking other Francophone countries to exclude Mauritania, while waiting to see if the AU will take similar action. Fages echoed Serman's view that Senagalese President Wade is taking inadequate steps to redress this situation. Fages expressed concern that the AU would wrongly interpret the passage of a package of laws by the Mauritanian national assembly as a step towards democracy given the assembly is democratically elected. Ambassador Boulware pointed out that if the President has not convoked it, it is not constitutional. Regarding next steps Fages emphasized the central question is when to negotiate with the coup leaders, and opined that time had not yet arrived. The French MFA believes the international community should stay the course and wait for the impact of Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement of 2000.

¶12. (U) Ambassador Boulware has cleared this message.

STAPLETON